

***"When I tell any truth it is not to  
convince those who do not know it but to defend those who do."***

***—William Blake***



*Untitled by Jerry Burchard, (original in color)*

# EROTIC AMATEURS

By Gene Youngblood

In the summer of 1979 I began researching a book to be called *Erotic Video*. It would be an art book on erotic works by independent video artists, especially women. The book would be profusely illustrated, of course, with critical analyses of the videotapes, interviews with the artists, and a philosophical essay or manifesto aimed at validating and legitimizing a tradition of erotic video art. In addition to being noble, fun, and horny, the project had obvious commercial value. For the videomaker it would provide a dignified showcase, promotion and visibility. For the potential distributor it would furnish access to high-quality product. For the consumer it would be a catalog as well as an edifying and eroticizing philosophical text.

I was not convinced that enough quality material existed to justify such a project, but I was determined to find out. I contacted three women who were in positions to know. One was coordinator of a public access channel in New York, the others directed video showcase centers in Chicago and San Francisco respectively. That more or less covered the nation. I asked for names, the more women among them the better. The combined lists totaled almost fifty artists, half of them women. I got in touch with most of them during the following year, by mail or in person, and viewed their work. Out of the fifty, only four seemed to me erotic and original enough to merit serious attention. Of the rest, the majority were either tedious performance pieces characterized by that detached, expressionless artworld posture that is always such a turn-on, or angry feminist tracts about sexual politics and pornography. None of it was good art. Well, excuse me, but anger, detachment, and bad art just aren't horny. It was a melan-

choly experience. I felt alone. Were there no erotomanes in videoland? I abandoned the project, having demonstrated once again that in our sex-negative culture no tradition of erotic practice in the moving-image arts will rise or flourish without a systematic institutional program to encourage and legitimize it.

The absence of a legitimating apparatus for the community of radical sexualists and erotophiles is not merely an inconvenience to be suffered by a minority of perverts; it deprives us all of a vital and necessary resource. It represents the traumatic failure of modern capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for high-temperature visionary obsessions, to satisfy the human appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness—for that is the essence of erotic experience and desire. And it is the essence of art. The exemplary modern artist is a broker in madness, a shaman on the frontiers of consciousness, always advancing one step further in the dialectic of outrage, relentlessly pushing the perimeters of the permitted and the possible. The artist, the erotomane, the left revolutionary, the madman are embodiments of a total imagination proposing a total universe. This is exhilarating and liberating in a society which serves so poorly the human need for transcendent experience. Thus, candid expression of the erotic imagination is a measure not only of personal freedom but of social and political freedom as well: it is emblematic of autonomy.

These are reasons for taking seriously the implications of an erotic practice in video. Consider two premises: First, that the video publishing industry will reach sufficient

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magnitude in the next few years to make the publishing of video art economically viable, and that erotic video art, if it existed, would surely constitute a significant portion of that market. Second, that erotic video by independent artists is different from traditional porno. It might be just as explicit, but such imagery will be contextualized in more erotic and imaginative ways. Traditional porno is the mass culture's idea of eroticism, the lowest-common-denominator approach to sexuality. And since it has historically been dominated by the principle of mass distribution, the cinema is the only contemporary art form that doesn't have a culturally validated tradition of erotic practice. But if cinematic production is personalized through video, and if distribution is specialized through electronic media, we might see the emergence of a new class of erotic art—the art of erotic amateurs.

The Electronics Revolution, bringing tools of ever higher quality at ever lower cost, is erasing the distinction between professionals and amateurs insofar as that's determined by the tools to which we have access. No motivation is so pure, no achievement more dignified than that of the amateur who does it for love. Yet in our professionalized society this most noble aspiration has been reduced to a sneering joke—the amateur as some kind of bozo—as though doing it for love were synonymous with ineptitude, an absence of quality and value. As a matter of fact, it is precisely the industrialization of cinematic practice by professionals that is responsible for the bankruptcy of erotic imagination in the most protean art form of our time. There is no vision more personal, no language more private, than those of erotic imagination and desire. Video, autonomous and self-contained, can express those visions and articulate those vocabularies better than any medium available today. Personalized production means personal vision and personal vision means *alternative* vision—the promise of a rich and inspiring tradition of erotic practice in the moving image arts.

So I get to write my manifesto after all. It is addressed to all video artists who take sex seriously—that means those for whom sexuality and eroticism are ways of living, ways of being in the world (or, for that matter, ways of being *out* of this world, of transcending it). I speak, in other words, to all erotic amateurs for whom sexuality embodies an intrinsic and surpassing positive value, an absolute good, in any and all of its consensual forms; for whom it is the primary source of energy, of intellectual stimulation, of emotional challenge, of

spiritual replenishment, transcendence and exaltation. I urge you: seize the opportunity to begin the erotic revolution in earnest. Take control of the production of erotic reality.

## EROTICISM, PORNOGRAPHY, ART

Before discussing the unique properties of video as a medium of erotic expression, let us contemplate the uniqueness of erotic art per se. Unlike all other art, it has the single purpose of sexual arousal. Thus, of the criteria by which we judge its merit the tumescence of the witness is paramount. We ask first is it horny, second is it art. Any other approach would be sheer hypocrisy. In fact, I suggest that we needn't even ask the second question, for the truly erotic work *is* art by definition. This becomes immediately apparent if we distinguish sexuality, sensuality and eroticism as separate phenomena.

Sexuality is physical and it involves the genitals. Sensuality is also physical but it need not involve genital sexuality at all. And eroticism is entirely cerebral. Wrongly called "of the flesh," it is a modality of consciousness, investing sex and sensuality with evocative power. Eroticism is enthusiasm for sex and sensuality, enthusiasm for our own personal power in the realm of the senses. All eroticism is autoeroticism, the total realization of the self, the fusion of mind and body. It is the ultimate embrace of life and of human potential, the affirmation of hope and generosity.

Pornography, on the other hand, is nothing more than sex without art. It isn't obscene because sex isn't obscene. Violence and sexism *are* obscene, but they are independent of pornography. I believe the feminist analysis that violence and sexism issue from pornography into the culture is both naive and politically unwise. It's naive because it fails to acknowledge the power of cultural context: porno, like any other discourse, can only reflect the sexism of the patriarchal culture in which it is produced. Sure there's a lot of sexist pornography because most porno is produced by men in a sexist culture. But there's a lot of nonsexist porno too; the former is both boring and obscene, the latter merely boring. The premise is politically unwise because, by equating pornography with obscenity, it situates feminism in a moralistic tradition and betrays a sex-negative bias.

Thus, while pornography's fatal sin is its one-dimensionality, eroticism is compounded of many resonances, touching upon our whole experience of our humanity and our limits as

personalities and physical beings. If pornography is knowing how to make love, eroticism is knowing how to love. And yet we'd be wrong to assume that there's no place in erotic art for the explicit. I reject the notion that sex must be rendered abstract, impressionistic and dreamy to qualify as erotic art. Nagisa Oshima demonstrated brilliantly in *The Realm of the Senses* that closeups of oral sex and penetration are not incompatible with depth of character, emotional resonance, and cinematic style. A "sensual" festival of fade-outs, fog filters and flute music will be just as boring as a "hard-core" festival chronicling the relentless transactions of depersonalized organs. So let us celebrate the infinitude of erotic desire from the explicit to the ideal, remembering that the zone of imagination lies somewhere between.

## STYLES OF EROTIC WILL

There is sexy art and art about sex. There are works in which eroticism is the subject, others in which it is content. Nothing is more explicitly sexual than the gynecologically clinical anatomies of Penthouse or most porno films, yet they are often non- or anti-erotic. Conversely, there are works wherein no specific sexual activity takes place, yet whose impact is eroticizing. Examples are Edward Weston's photographs of nautilus shells or peppers, or Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings. Thus, like all realities, the erotic universe is divided into the objective and subjective, the explicit and the implied, the literal and the metaphoric. Within these polarities we can identify at least two well-established traditions of erotic practice: documents and fantasies—works which chronicle erotic life as it is lived by real people in the real world, and those which give form to the imagination and unrealized desire.

I want now to survey some possibilities within these general categories. My frame of reference will not be the cinema but still photography—for, unquestionably, it is photography that defines the context within which all other erotic visual art is viewed and interpreted in contemporary society. The most pervasive sexual iconography of our time is to be found in the elaborate, imaginative, socially ratified scenarios of fashion and commercial photography and in the simplistic, repetitive, anatomical shots of Penthouse or Blueboy. Because these set the cultural tone for the erotic in photography today, they must be understood as reference points even for those who wish to present a radically different vision of sexuality.



# a shaman on the frontiers of consciousness."

practice both an aesthetic and a political advantage. And no class of people in our society stand to gain more from this than women. Feminists constitute the first mass grass-roots political movement in history to take sex seriously, to address itself to sensual desire, fantasy and personal eroticism as political issues. Our first-wave foremothers could not, or did not dare, sustain a political discourse on sex; certainly no socialist movement ever debated the quality of orgasms and the nature of sexual self-discovery. But feminists today cannot separate politics from sexuality, cannot exclude their erotic fantasies from their political programs.

Like it or not, modern feminists are the shock troops of the sexual revolution, and video is the most powerful tool in the erotic arsenal. Video offers women an unparalleled opportunity to express their own sexuality and eroticism in their own terms, and to institutionalize a uniquely female erotic practice in the arts. I speak of feminine sexuality, not a feminist one. Erotic imagination and desire cannot and should not ever be codified by social or political convention. Unfortunately, the feminist movement in recent years has become a moralistic force, alienating many women (and men) who otherwise are dedicated and passionate feminists. For many women, what is supposed to be *feminist* sexuality simply does not conform with their own experience of *female* sexuality; they aren't about to join the ideological lockstep that dictates which sexual positions are politically correct.

I know plenty of feminist women who are also highly sexual and intensely erotic human beings. They are bold, adventurous, imaginative, alive. They constantly affirm a robust, lusty, yet subtle female sexuality in all its energy and diversity. Of all my hopes for an erotic practice in video, the anticipation of female expressions by women is greatest. All I ever see is the male view of womanhood and female sexuality; where are women's erotic fantasies about men? We men need to see and hear them as much as you need to articulate them. We are all erotic amateurs in the sense that our patriarchal and repressive culture has not given us the opportunity to become erotically eloquent, has not provided the vocabulary for articulating a transcendent and free sexuality. So I urge you, take up your video tools and begin producing models of your reality, songs of your lust, poems of your erotic imagination and desire. We need your vision, your passion, your optimism and courage.

Where are the video visions of transvestite desire to compare with Julio Mitchell's or George Alpert's images of queens? Where are the video testimonials to the World's Oldest Profession that can match Bob Alderman's *Ladies of the Night* and *Gentlemen of Leisure* or Roswell Angier's *A Kind of Life* or Eric Kroll's *Sex Objects*? Where is the video odyssey of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll in the world of teenage outlaws that can equal the power of Larry Clark's *Tulsa*?

## FANTASEX

So much for sociology. What about fantasy? Here too the unique properties of video are well-suited to erotic practice. Computer-controlled editing, digital post-production and special effects, computer graphics and electronic processing and synthesis are powerful resources for artists who wish to express their erotic desire in poetic form. But a portapak and imagination are all we really need. And we shouldn't assume that fantasy is without politics. Quite the contrary: unrestricted by the vagaries of life in the streets, erotic fantasy has historically furnished the dominant images that govern our perception of erotic experience and its possibilities.

The categories here are much the same as those in the sociological domain, with perhaps the opportunity for somewhat greater nuance and subtlety. And again, still photography serves as our frame of reference. Where, for example, is the video counterpart to Duane Michaels' surreal psychosexual photo-narratives? Where are the electronic transvestite dreams that can compare with Gilles Larraín's *Idols* or John Ashley's *Pagan Babies*? Where are the video buffs of bondage and discipline that can give us testimonials like those of Steve Kahn or Helmut Newton. Where are the portapak fetishists and narcissists who can show us secrets like Lucas Samaras's *Album* or Pierre Molinier's *Lut-mem* or Ralph Gibson's *Days at Sea*? Where is the self-referential erotica about erotica to compare with Robert Heinecken's *cliches-Vary* or Joyce Neimanas' work? Where are the erotic satires to equal Les Krims' parodic tableaus? And finally, where are the homoerotic poems in video that have the beauty and power of Robert Mapplethorpe's pictures or Arthur Tress' *Phallic Fantasies* and Men Between *Themselves*, or the Lesbian metaphors of Karin Szekessy and Irina Ionesco?

## WOMEN

It is clear that video confers upon erotic women

## THE UNDERGROUND

Where are the great video essays of underground sexuality to rival those in photography, such as Brassai's secret Paris or, more recently, Charles Gatewood's *Sidekipping*? The political significance of video as a tool for sociological investigation, documentation and representation is widely acknowledged. There is a profound difference between a statement about some social phenomenon and an expression of that phenomenon, producing by those who constitute it. Video offers radical sexualists and erotomanes a method of controlling the social representation of their reality without distortion and bias, the means of producing and sustaining a partisan discourse that makes the contours of their desire humanly understandable.

## THE REAL THING

It is obvious to everyone by now that the intimacy and immediacy of video make it the supreme tool for audiovisual documentation. Who among owners of a portapak has not taped themselves in the act of love or encircled their passion in a live video feedback loop? The sheer number of home-made erotic tapes must by now rival that of Polaroids. Most of it is underlit, middle-distance tripod stuff with no cameraperson. Where are the great video documents of lovemaking to be compared with those of photography, such as Richard Kirscht's *Pas de Deux*, John Brooks' *Along The Riverbank*, Elsa Dorfman's *His Idea* or Philip Masnick's powerful portraits of homoerotic acts? There is enormous potential in video for the creation of emotionally overwhelming and erotically powerful portraits of real people making real love and having real orgasms. There is, arguably, no more fascinating and compelling spectacle for a human witness than other humans transported in good ambient sound can only amplify the ecstasy. The presence of a cameraperson and erotic tension and power of such a moment. Still photography has demonstrated repeatedly that such documents can be art. I am certain that video, properly employed, can equal and surpass photography's testament.

our sexual norms and mores, a considerable body of photography has appeared which actively addresses this issue from several standpoints. Moreover, its arena includes forums—such as museums, galleries and the "serious" books and magazines of the photographic enterprise—which we take very seriously and reserve for the highest levels of discourse.